



RANTS & RAVES

As new legislation is introduced that makes it illegal for anyone to have anything to do with computers, **Mel Croucher** kicks the habit of a lifetime and hangs up his phone

WHAT THE DICKENS



MEL CROUCHER RANTS

I live in a rickety old house on an ancient street by the sea. This old house has been around for over two hundred years, and sometimes I glimpse the ghosts of my former neighbours through the salty grime and seagull poo on the little casement windows of my work room. Most often I fancy I can see Doctor Arthur Conan Doyle stomping along the pavement to his surgery at the top of the street.

Sometimes I imagine a cock-sure young bloke called Peter Sellers playing silly-buggers in the pub doorway opposite; he was born in the flat above what is now the Chinese restaurant on the corner.

The most poignant ghost that haunts my street is a ragged-arsed little boy named Charles Dickens, wide-eyed with confusion because his childhood home has been a patch of open ground since the Luftwaffe destroyed it in 1941. I wonder if these spectres ever see me, as I scribble away here in the future, before they disappear into their English Heritage blue

plaques. I wonder if they know they are contributing to issue 236 of *Computer Shopper*. I wonder if they expect any royalties or reward from me, as I attempt to reveal a massive contradiction in the latest computer laws by exploiting their quotes.

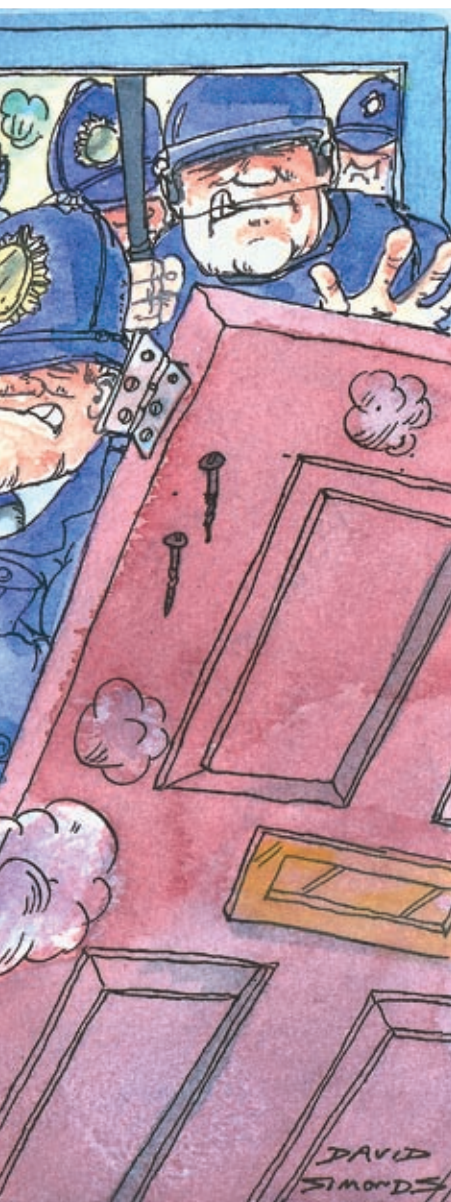
"It is every man's business to see justice done." (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories of Sherlock Holmes*, 1892)

Computer crime is a many-headed monster. It snaps and snarls with viruses and denial-of-service

attacks, and it seduces the gullible by placing entrapments, pornography, deceit and temptation online. Hackers and computer crooks cost the UK economy at least £2 billion a year, and every year the situation grows worse.

CRIMINAL INJUSTICE

Since 1990, computer crime has been covered by the Computer Misuse Act, which relates to unauthorised access and modification of data. But justice has rarely been done, and the old Act has been out of date for a very long time. Which is why sweeping amendments are coming into force in a couple of months under a new Police and Justice Act. I expect the new laws will be introduced with a mixture of fake determination and smugness, and no doubt the media will repeat the official bunkum so that the Great British Public will believe something is being done to protect us. In actual fact, the opposite is happening.



*"I arrest you all in the name of the leauw!" (Peter Sellers, *The Pink Panther*, 1964)*

As far as I can tell, the new amendments seem to have been put together by that ultimate police nitwit Inspector Clouseau, and very soon it looks as if everyone will be liable to arrest for anything to do with computers. It becomes a criminal offence for anyone to commit an unauthorised act in relation to any computer, or anyone who intends to perform an unauthorised act via any computer, or who impairs the operation of any computer, or who hinders access to any program or data held on any computer, or who impairs the operation or reliability of any computer data. For good measure, the law extends to anyone who supplies any program or data likely to be used to commit an offence, or anyone paying someone else to commit any of these offences.

That just about covers the entire computer industry, then.

Even thinking about computer crime will be punishable by a prison sentence of up to 10 years and/or a huge fine.

*"If the law supposes that," said Mr. Bumble, "the law is an ass." (Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 1839)*

Of course this law is an ass. Computer code is neutral, and the same code can be used for good as well as bad. It is nonsense to hold the originators and facilitators of code to account for the use it is put to. Besides, most malware and dodgy doings such as phishing originate from outside of the UK, where these new laws can't be applied. Much more importantly, since April this year the discretion to handle such things as computer fraud has been handed over to UK banks, so that the police "can concentrate on cases more likely to result in a positive outcome". In other words, at the same time as the government is introducing all these swingeing laws, existing computer crime has been effectively decriminalised.

This will work wonders for the national crime statistics, with the banks now responsible for tracing computer criminals and sorting out the mess, but in reality the Home Office doesn't give a toss about computer crime. And as the police wash their hands of the matter, they can be confident that the last thing the banks will do is reveal the extent of the problem. Bah, humbug!

PHONEY WAR



**MEL CROUCHER
RAVES**

I'm declaring here and now that I'm clean. I've sorted myself out. I can handle it. Keep reading, and learn from my amazing story. I'll teach you how to kick the habit for yourself.

At its peak, I was spending thousands of pounds feeding my addiction. I didn't realise I was slipping into dependency until it was too late. My craving grew until I was unable to function without a fix. I know it was utterly pathetic, and I admit that my first waking action was to jolt my system with the familiar but sickening buzz of habit and ritual. And once I had surfaced for the day, I needed a regular hit, usually several times an hour. My paraphernalia got used and abused and I became indiscriminate over my suppliers. Sometimes I didn't even bother to check the gear they sold me. And it goes without saying that once my

suppliers had got me hooked, they increased the cost of my habit and ripped me off mercilessly.

It wasn't always like this. In my innocent youth, I didn't know anyone who had access to a private telephone. There was a tickertape machine on display in the bicycle shop, but nobody was prepared to fork out three shillings a week to subscribe to it. There was also a public telephone no more than a five-minute walk away, and for four old pennies we could talk to long-lost friends and distant relatives, apart from the fact that we didn't know their number because they didn't have a phone. Back then we communicated by letter, with several postal deliveries a day. In case of emergency, birth, marriage or death, we invested in a telegram at three pence a word. But, oh boy, when it changed, it changed fast.

FAX AND FIGURES

I rented my first personal telephone line and dedicated number about 40 years ago, for business purposes. Before long I was seduced by glamour and I invested in a telex machine, which had more buttons than a church organ and was almost as musical. By the 1980s, I was ready to move on to the hard stuff. When fax machines became available, I got myself a second phone line so that it wouldn't interfere with my vital phone calls. As my habit increased I thought I needed an ex-directory third line, for those private moments. Obviously I was an early adopter of one of those brick-sized phones, powered by a hernia battery in a suitcase. Ah, how I remember the first rush of using radio frequencies instead of wires.

I also embraced satellite and cable networks, even though they gave me nothing more than I already had. I thought that having a phone in the car was mandatory, and I also thought I really needed a spare mobile in case of network problems. When email shrunk to pocket-size I was right up there with the best of them, consuming designer drugs with street names such as BlackBerry. As I have told you, at its peak I was spending thousands for the privilege of being interrupted wherever I roamed by junk calls, inconsequential piffle and spam. It was insane. I was insane. Everyone around me was insane. There was only one thing to do. I decided to go cold turkey.

I switched my landlines to answerphone and my mobiles to voicemail, and I stopped answering phone calls. The sky did not fall in. The world did not end. I soon realised that I didn't need multiple

lines, handsets and contracts at all, and I cancelled the lot. In the ensuing silence I pruned my contacts book ruthlessly, and I trained myself not to open any texts or emails unless they came from a source on my white-list. I discovered I needed to check messages only four times a day, not four times every waking hour.

WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

And now some strange things are happening. My social skills have started to improve. I communicate out of choice and not because of a Pavlovian reaction to a ringtone or beep. My efficiency and productivity are rocketing, and I find that the more time and money I save, the better I feel – all thanks to my freedom from comms dependency.

I invite you to carry out your own addiction audit. Sit down and make a list of all the pushers and suppliers of landlines, mobiles, broadband, cable and satellite to every member of your household. Don't forget to include the costs of any subscription sites, anti-spam and anti-virus packages, and all the little extras that have snuck on to your monthly bills for inconvenient payment methods and the like. Now tabulate all the costs.

Next assess the value of every one of these resources in terms of the real benefit to everyday life: what is essential, what is a luxury, what is simply there if you ever need it and what percentage of all these resources do you simply never use. Finally, work out how much time you waste every day, week, month and year on useless communications.

I'm not suggesting that you junk the lot, but you could do worse than visit Carphone Warehouse and pick up a free MobileWorld SIM card. I popped mine into a newly redundant handset and I now use it when I'm away from a WiFi connection to call colleagues, family and friends all over the planet for 5p to 7p a minute. It's brilliant, and I calculate that I'll be spending less than £120 a year on such calls. I'm ashamed to admit that my former contracts used to cost me that every month.

As for when I'm at home or in any other WiFi zone, I use Skype, because it doesn't cost me a penny. I cheated a bit by forwarding all my former voicemail and answerphone messages to Skype, and it took a little time to disengage completely from the seduction and blackmail of all those insane contracts.

Take a deep breath. Follow my example, clean up your act, save yourself a fortune and preserve your sanity. ☑